

KU Leuven – University of Leuven
Centre for Sociology of Education

**Merger of colleges of higher education in Belgium (Flanders). A different
experience of the college leaders and the lecturers.**

Jef C. Verhoeven

Lectures at
Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai, PR China) on 9 April 2003
and
Peking University (Beijing, PR China) on 14 April 2003

Merger of colleges of higher education in Belgium (Flanders). A different experience of the college leaders and the lecturers¹.

Jef C. Verhoeven (Centre for Sociology of Education, KU Leuven, Belgium) and Geert Devos (Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, Belgium)

Under the influence of the decree of 13 July 1994 the number of colleges² of higher education in Flanders (Belgium) has been drastically reduced. Of about 164 institutions in 1992 only 24 were left in the academic year 2001-2002. The decree on the colleges of higher education did not oblige to merge, but colleges could gain a lot of advantages if they merged. Indeed, the decree introduced a block grant system which gave the institutions of higher education responsibility to govern their resources. The Flemish government³ expected this to be an instrument to bring these institutions to a more efficient use of their resources. Moreover, control of the government would be more simplified and the offer of courses would be more transparent. Institutions of higher education would also be more autonomous and would have the chance to take more strategic decisions. This new decree and the merging of the colleges would also create more opportunities to conduct research and provide social service provision.

Five years later the decree seemed to have attained its targets, i.e. many old colleges merged to a new college of higher education and the general managers of the colleges were happy with the results. What we did not know was how the institutions came to the merger and how it was experienced by the lecturers.

¹ This paper is the basis of the guest lectures of professor J.C. Verhoeven at Shanghai Jiao Tong University (9 April 2003) and Peking University (14 April 2003).

² Belgium has a binary higher education system composed of universities and colleges of higher education (or Polytechnics). The first is active in academic education, scientific research and scientific service provision. "Colleges should, in the interests of society, be simultaneously active in the field of college education, social service provision and, where appropriate, project-based scientific research in collaboration with a university or other body in this country or abroad." (Art. 3 of the Law of 13 July 1994). Colleges provide a more professional oriented education.

³ Belgium is a federal state in which each Community (Flemish, French speaking, German speaking) is responsible for the educational policy. This is the Flemish government in our case.

When we look at the literature concerning merger of universities and colleges we found that the intended dynamic organisation is seldom attained and that the whole procedure goes together with stress (McHugh & Kyle, 1993). This was also the case in Flanders (Belgium). Not only is the process paved with problems, also the result is not sure (Fielden, 1991; Halter & Gullerud, 1995; Patterson, 2000). Almost all variables in the project of Halter & Gullerud (1995) have been changed, sometimes positively, but more often negatively.

Merging is a long lasting process (Goedegebuure, 1992; Goedegebuure & Meek, 1991). Martin & Samels (1994) estimate that this process last about five years. At the moment of our research the number of colleges was already reduced to 29, and twenty of them had more than 2.000 students.

Two tracks of research were followed. First, we made 5 case studies on the base of interviews with the general manager of the college, managers of the central college offices of the college, and heads of departments. Second, we conducted a survey among the lecturers⁴ of 11 colleges (four of these colleges were also approached in the case studies; N= 773) using a structured, mailed questionnaire.

First, we present the results of the case studies, second, we give an overview of the main results of the survey, third, we compare the data of the case studies with the data of the survey.

1. Consequences of the merger

It would be nice to give an overview of the successful mergers and failures. Nevertheless, it is hard to say when a merger is successful or not. Therefore we confine our description to the consequences of the merger as they were referred at by the respondents in our case studies. In many cases our respondents also referred at the causes of these consequences. We give also these causes as they are seen by the general manager, managers of the central college offices and chairs of the departments.

⁴ We use the title of lecturer for all teachers of the colleges, without making a difference between professors (of different ranks).

First, we describe the consequences of the mergers, and next we describe for two colleges the link between causes and consequences.

1.1. Consequences of the merger

Merging of colleges of higher education may have a lot of consequences. Among the most important the following were detected in our five case studies:

- clear and stable supply of multi-sectoral courses;
- improvement of financial stability;
- growth of facilities (ICT, infrastructure);
- support of the departments by the central administration;
- departments learn from each other;
- collaboration among departments for teaching;
- improved availability of the staff;
- changing mentality;
- more outspoken profile.

1.1.1. Clear and stable supply of multi-sectoral courses

One of the most important purposes of the decree on the colleges was to offer a solution for the too much split up supply of courses. If a college offers too many courses and the content of these courses is not clearly defined students might get mixed up and may have problems to come to a decision about the courses they want to attend. This merger was a solution for the problem of not finding enough students for some fields of study at particular moments. Because of the merger the supply of courses could be bigger than before and this could also create the possibility to find enough students to keep classes stable. A stable offer of some courses can contribute to more stability in the employment situation of the lecturers. On the other hand it is doubtful that when a college offers too many small courses that this might contribute to stability of employment. Small courses are vulnerable.

1.1.2. Improvement of financial stability

Nevertheless, a clear and stable offer of a varied set of courses is no absolute guarantee for the financial stability of the college. Financial stability depends on a kind of solidarity between the merging partners. If there is no financial solidarity between the different partners of the merger, there is no solution for the problem of financial stability. This became true in one of our cases. The partners in this case were not prepared to pay for the debts made by their colleagues before the merger.

If there is financial solidarity, than it is possible that the college administration might help to solve the problems in some departments, or interfere when it is clear that financial mismanagement by a department might hurt the rest of the college.

1.1.3. Growth of facilities

The merger was for some colleges the starting point to build new halls. As long as the colleges were small some could not afford to invest in new buildings. Since the merger some departments could build because they belong to a large college which gave the department a larger financial base. Not only these new buildings were the consequence of the merging process, this process made it affordable for most of the colleges to organize an intranet work and equip classes with multimedia equipment. This intranet is very important for the colleges, because it allows the different departments (very often housed on separate campuses) to have a fast information network with each other.

Not only is the material infrastructure improved. It is now also possible to establish special services that can take care of legal problems, the quality assurance, the international relations etc. of the different departments of a college.

1.1.4. Support of departments by the central administration of the college

Because of the merger it is now possible that services that were the duty of the departments before the merger, are offered by central college offices. On condition of a good relationship between the departments and the central offices, this central support might contribute a lot to the reduction of the work of a department. In a number of colleges we find central offices for

personnel, finance, and students. Many colleges provide central support for the departments concerning quality assurance, internationalization, scientific research and social service provision.

In some colleges departments and central offices collaborate smoothly, in others we met an opposition between the departments and the central offices.

1.1.5. Departments learn from each other

Since the merger of the colleges they have learnt to collaborate. This collaboration is very often expressed in working groups consisting of the members belonging to different departments. Chairs of the departments thought that because of the meetings with other colleagues they got a better understanding of several problems; for instance, they got a better view on legal problems, quality assurance, year reports, scientific research and internationalization.

1.1.6. Interdepartmental projects

The new situation of the colleges could also contribute to a new form of collaboration between different departments in a college. Most of the colleges only refer to some forms of temporary collaboration among students and/or lecturers. Some colleges stress the fact that in these working groups students and/or lecturers came to a collaboration but are aware that this collaboration is only happening between some of the students and some of the lecturers. In other words, the merger did not contribute to a structural change.

1.1.7. Being part of higher education

Before the merger, in colleges providing only a BA training there was often a relationship with secondary schools, for instance teacher colleges preparing teachers for primary education had special relations with secondary schools in order to give their students practical teacher training. After the merger this link between the college and the secondary schools was cut. This process contributed to an other concept of the task of the lecturer. Before the merger, the task of the lecturer was only seen as a teaching task. After the merger, lecturers not only spent time on teaching, but also collaborated for quality assurance, internationalization, scientific

research, social service provision, etc. This process had already taken place in colleges providing master degrees. Both processes contributed to a smaller distance between a BA and a MA training. Most of the chairs of the BA departments are happy about this development whereas most chairs of the MA departments didn't like this development.

1.1.8. Improved availability of the staff

In principle, a merger of colleges can also contribute to an higher form of availability of the staff. Lecturers belonging to different departments and being in the situation of collaborating with each other might contribute to new forms of collaboration. This is in principle possible, but very often a number of difficulties are met. It is e.g. not easy to make agreements between departments about the time lecturers have to spend in each department. Moreover, very often it is difficult for lecturers belonging to different departments to get a promotion.

Another problem is that departments expect different things from lecturers teaching a particular field in several departments, even when both fields are very close (e.g. commerce for BA or commerce for MA). All colleges accept only superfluous personnel when it is possible. Sometimes they exchange personnel.

1.1.9. More outspoken profile

Another advantage of a merger is that a large college can make itself more visible for potential clients. If a college presents itself under one label, and makes clear that it offers a wide variety of fields of study, this college may attract more students than when the departments presented themselves as separate units. Two colleges saw a significant enlargement of the numbers of students. The colleges with departments presenting themselves as separate units did not take any advantage in student numbers from the merging process. In these departments the chair was often approached as director, as lecturers were used to do before the merger, not as the chairperson of the department.

1.2. Influences on the merger

Among the many influences contributing to the merging process, we stress seven. First, the scale of the merger.

1.2.1. Scale of the merging process

Small merged colleges lose a lot of possibilities that may give advantages to the college in comparison with the situation before the merger. It is more difficult for them to find additional money to construct new buildings, to develop the necessary internet equipment or to provide the needed support of the central college administration. It is also hard for them to offer a large variety of courses, which makes it more difficult for them to enlarge the number of students, what may reduce the financial stability of the college. If at a certain moment some courses are not popular anymore, the stability of the position of the lecturers might be endangered. Big colleges are in a better position to attain these new targets. Not necessarily, but the conditions are at least present to strive for these targets.

The scale of the merging process has two important characteristics: the number of students and the relative share of the different courses (departments) in the college. If a college of 4.000 students has for instance one big department and six small ones, the stability of the college may also be threatened when the popularity of the big department diminishes. A balance between the departments gives a stronger guarantee for stability.

1.2.2. Local competition

Colleges that wanted to merge had also to face the local competition between departments in a particular geographical area. For some colleges it was a challenge that other colleges offered the same course in the same geographical area. This was inspired by the hope to attract students of that particular area. If this policy had as a consequence that a college established too many small departments on different places, the financial and employment stability of that college was reduced and the college also lost the advantages won because of the scaling-up.

1.2.3. Planning of the merger

A good planning of the merger proved to contribute to a gaining of time during a merging process, and a reduction of tensions during the start of the merger. Planning is also important for the coordination between the different services, the division of the authority and the division of tasks between the central college administration and the departments.

A basic characteristic of the merging process of some colleges was to take the legal problems as a starting point for the negotiations. If the negotiators attained a legal agreement about the merger, they often decided to merge. Very often they later detected that the process was not well enough prepared, and often they found that it was not easy to find an acceptable road to live together in a new organisation. Some of our case studies suffered of this procedure.

1.2.4. Efficient use of time and resources after the merger

Another challenge for merging colleges is the lack of time and resources invested in the implementation of the merger once the merging process was started. If the managers do not foresee enough time and resources for further development of the college, it is possible that a large amount of time and resources gets lost in problems of co-ordination, planning of infrastructure and provision of equipment. Because of these demands a lot of meetings were organized and in many departments was thought that these meetings took away the attention for teaching, which is seen by them as the most important task of a department.

Once the members of the colleges had the feeling that the merger created more possibilities for the departments in comparison with the time before the merger, than many were prepared to invest in the general services (e.g. personnel, internationalisation, quality assurance) provided by the college.

1.2.5. Professionalisation of the central administration of a college

Together with a good planning of the merger and the work after the planning, it was important for the colleges to take care of the professionalisation of the central administration. The administrators in colleges are aware that if the service provided by the college offices is not superior to what was offered before the merger, it is possible that the departments will become reluctant to invest in the college offices. Most of the college administrators thought it to be necessary to invest in a professional training of the college offices. Moreover they believed that the managers of the college offices should be good leaders of the personnel and should pay attention to the demands of the departments. If the departments do not receive the benefits they expect, it is possible that they refuse to contribute to these college offices.

1.2.6. Balanced division of resources between colleges and departments

Some colleges take a large part of the resources to provide services on the level of the college, whereas other colleges distribute larger parts of the resources among the departments. In the latter the departments are supposed to provide more services themselves. Whatever the solution in each college, it is obvious that the leaders of the colleges have the ‘feeling’ that there is a balance between the received resources and the provided services.

1.2.7. Strong central authority

Only if a college has a board or a central administration with high authority, the distribution of the resources between the central and the non-central level can be realized easily, and the advantages of providing some services on the college level can be attained. This is the case in colleges where the departments have a good representation in the boards where decisions about the distribution of the resources are taken. If the departments in a college do not believe in the advantage of a central administration and the provision of services by the college administration, it is very likely that most of the resources will be spread over the departments. This actually diminishes the possibility to offer more and/or better services than before the merger.

In the two following tables we give a short overview of the different influences on the results of the merger in each of the five colleges and the results of the merger.

Tabel 1. Influences on the results of the merger of five colleges

Colleges	Size	Local competition	Planning	Efficient use of time and resources	Professionalisation of central administration	Resources for college	Strong central authority
A	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
B	-	-	+/-	+/-	+/-	-	+/-
C	+	+	-	-	-	+	+/-
D	+	+	+/-	+/-	-	-	-
E	-	+	-	-	-	+/-	+/-

+ = influential

+/- = more or less influential

- = not influential

Tabel 2. Results of the merger in five colleges

College	Clear and stable offer of courses	Stability of finances	Growth of facilities	Support by central administration	Departments learn from each other	Interdepartmental projects	Higher Education mentality	Availability of staff	Profile
A	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	-	+
B	-	+/-	+/-	+/-	+	-	+	-	-
C	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	+
D	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-
E	-	+/-	+	-	+	-	+	-	-

+ = result clearly present

+/- = result more or less present

- = result not or very weakly present

1.3. Results of the merger process and influences in two colleges

In the two tables we see that the merger has contributed to results that are present in all colleges. This is the case for a learning process: in all colleges general managers and heads of departments admit that they have learned from the other old colleges involved in the merger. They also have the feeling that lecturers in comparison with the situation before the merger became more aware of the typical calling of higher education, i.e. attention for teaching, research and social service provision. On the other hand none of the five colleges could develop interdepartmental educational programs within the new college, or attain a greater availability of the staff of the different departments in the new college (the staff is overwhelmingly employed in one department).

Apart from these similarities, colleges differ quite a lot from each other as far as the results of the merger are concerned. We give a wider description of two colleges, namely A and D.

College A

This college contains 11 departments with together more than 10,000 students. For most of the old colleges that belong now to the new merged college the merging process had a lot of positive consequences. The college can now offer a wide range of courses what gives the college a greater financial stability. Because the college could rely on a larger amount of money, it was possible to build new halls for departments (what would have been impossible before the merger), start a computer network in the college and establish special services for all departments. Nevertheless, some departments did not always experience these central services as a benefit. These central offices are sometimes seen as a competitor or a kind of central control by the college central administration. In spite of this, the college offers itself on the market as one unit and got a transparent profile.

Various reasons for these results may be mentioned. The new college had a clear concept about what it wanted to be: a concentration of most of the departments in one town (not one campus), the abolishment of double courses (for instance, no similar teacher training on two campuses), and a wide offer of different courses. This was possible because the college had not to worry about local competition between departments offering the same courses. Already in the beginning of the merger the college was quite large and they spent a year preparing the

merger, involving the board, representatives of the personnel and the general manager. The result was a good plan to merge what made the process develop smoothly once it was started. Although the merger was not without problems, very fast the meetings in the departments and on college level spend more time in the usual problems of the organization of the education, and less in problems specifically linked with the merger process. Because of the professional approach of the central college offices the interference of these services in the departments was quite easily accepted, although several departments claim that some of these services may be improved.

This college has a very strong central authority, what diminishes the discussions about the division of the resources between the departments. Moreover, the college administration has only little problems to find money for the central administration, or to support departments that need more help for some projects, and can in addition provide some money for research.

College D

College D has about 6,000 students, but in spite of this large number the college could not make any serious programming advantage. The problem in this college was the autonomy of the individual departments (the former old colleges). This autonomy is also supported by the spread of the departments over several towns in different provinces. Very often the departments present themselves as separate units to the student market, not as a department of one college. The decision making by the board of the college was mostly reduced to the acceptance of the decisions taken by the departments. Management of finances and personnel was still the responsibility of the departments. At the top of this college we find a board that cannot take important decisions that may apply on all the departments, and consequently the college could not provide central services as we saw in college A. The most important central service provided by the college is the annual report to the government. Nevertheless, the general manager and the heads of the departments saw some advantages in the merger process. First, the departments learned from each other, and second, the departments providing only a BA training became more aware of the other demands of an academic institution, i.e. they paid more attention to research and social service provision than they did before the merger.

2. How do lecturers look at the merger?

Until now the description of the merger was confined to the opinions of the educational leaders and managers of central college offices. In this part of the paper we give a short description of the opinions of the lecturers concerning the merger. Although we made an analysis in depth of a wide range of variables that can explain why lecturers shared different opinions or not, we only give a general overview of some variables in order to make a comparison between the data of the case studies and the survey possible.

Satisfaction about the merger⁵ ($\alpha = .85$)

Unlike the general managers and the chairs of the departments lecturers are not satisfied about the merger. They do not see many advantages and complain about a lot during the merging process. On a scale of 5 the score is 2.4, which means that the major group of the lecturers is dissatisfied. About 70% are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. The score is different between the colleges ($F(9,512) = 4.88$; $p < .001$) and in college A where the top was very pleased about the merger, lecturers score only a weak 2.37. The score in college D was even lower: 2.1, although the leaders of this college were not totally unhappy about the merger.

Work satisfaction ($\alpha = .86$)

On a scale of 5 the lecturers score 3.48. Though this is more than half, the average score in similar organizations is higher, i.e. 3.75. The average score is different in the colleges ($F(10,759) = 5.42$; $p < .001$). College A (3.24) and college D (3.29) have even lower scores than the average.

Administrative load ($\alpha = .76$)

Since the merger according to the lecturers their administrative load has increased. On a scale of 5 we find an average score of 4.16, and there is no difference between the average college scores ($F(9,505) = 1.49$; $p = .15$).

Working hours

⁵ Most of the variables are a collection of several items to be answered on a 1-to-5 disagree-agree response scale (based on Likert scaling). For each scale we give the Cronbach α . Changes were measured on a 1 to 3 scale.

The number of working hours per week has tremendously increased since the merger. Before the merger the lecturers estimate a working week on 37.82 hours, but after the merger they think the average is 43.99 hours. This is a common opinion in all colleges. The differences between colleges are very small and not significant ($F(10,430) = 1.042$; $p = .41$).

Didactic equipment

Lecturers believe that their college can rely on sufficient and modern didactic equipment, but they are not satisfied with this equipment. They do not think that since the merger the educational infra-structure has been better adapted to the educational needs (score 2.53 on a scale of 5). There are remarkable differences between the colleges as far as this opinion is concerned ($F(9,493) = 4.72$; $p < 0.001$). Though not high, the score of college D (3.03) is higher than the score of college A (2.51). In other words, the lecturers of college A consider the didactic equipment as substandard.

The major part of the lecturers think that the amount (62% of the lecturers) and the quality (52% of the lecturers) of the didactic equipment did not change very much since the merger. They do not believe that the financial resources of their department ($\chi^2 = 32.021$; $df = 10$; $p < .001$) or college ($\chi^2 = 92.986$; $df = 10$; $p < .001$) were enlarged since the merger and this belief is different depending on the college of the lecturers. In both colleges A and D about 80 % of the lecturers believe that the departmental and college financial resources have diminished.

Participation in decision-making ($\alpha = .85$)

Together with the merging process the legislator has given an new structure of councils that should make participation by lecturers in decision-making possible. Nevertheless, this new structure does not convince the lecturers that they have a clear say in the decision-making process: on a scale of 5 the score is 2.29 and it is obvious that colleges differ a lot ($F(10,738) = 1.99$; $p = .0318$). College D scores a little higher (2.38), but it does not reach 3 (the centre of the scale).

Positive is to see that according to the lecturers the level of participation is enhanced a little since the merger (2.17 on a scale of 3). Here again, we can conclude that colleges live their

own life in this respect ($F(10,516) = 2.67$; $p = .0035$), although college D and A are close to the average score.

Identification with the department ($\alpha = .77$)

Merger means to most lecturers losing the position in the old college and becoming a member of a new department in a new college. It could be expected that not all lecturers would identify themselves with the new department. The identification is not high, but higher than the identification with the new college. The score is 3.04 out of 5. About 63% of the lecturers identify themselves moderately or strongly with the new department and this does not differ significantly between colleges.

Identification with the college ($\alpha = .82$)

The identification of the lecturers with the new college is weak. The average score is 3.04 out of 5. Only 37% identify themselves moderately or strongly with the new college and this differs between the colleges ($F(10,741) = 1.94$; $p = .0375$). College D with its very decentralized decision-making structure has the lowest score (2.68), what could be expected.

Communication with colleagues ($\alpha = .71$)

In spite of a merger that made quite a lot of lecturers unhappy, there is still communication between them in the departments, though low. The score is 3.37 on a scale of 5, but there are significant differences among the colleges ($F(10, 741) = 4.47$; $p < .0001$). College A (score = 3.24) and college D (score = 3.01) score even lower than the average.

Cohesion (or collaboration) among the lecturers ($\alpha = .93$)

The cohesion between the lecturers of the same department is not strong. A weak 3.32 out of 5 is the average score and this score is not the same in each college ($F(10, 743) = 4.60$; $p < .0001$). This score is lower in the very big college A (score = 3.18) and even lower in the decentralized, but smaller college D (score = 2.93). According to the lecturers this cohesion is lower than before the merger. On a scale of 3 the score is 1.95 which means that cohesion

went down after the merger. About 75% of the lecturers thought that nothing has been changed after the merger and this opinion is the same in most of the colleges.

3. Do college leaders and lecturers agree?

It is obvious that some advantages of the merger like better financial stability, wider offer of courses, more resources for college services, etc. are obvious for the college managers, but these benefits are not always perceived as an advantage by the lecturers. Nevertheless, lecturers should be motivated to continue offering good teaching and research in spite of the feeling that they lost the familiar surroundings of the old college. This is not an easy task and in many colleges we detected a distance between what the college leaders believed to be the profit of the merger and that what lecturers thought to be the consequences of the merger. In the first part of this paper it became obvious that the leaders of the different colleges often had a different opinion about the direction a college had to go after the merger. Which of the different options is the best, we will or cannot decide. We confine this analysis showing the differences and similarities between leaders and lecturers.

College A is a very centralized institute: most of the investments are made on the level of the college and the purpose is that the entire college takes advantage of it. In spite of this optimism among the leaders, we stated that the lecturers of this college are among the least satisfied of the lecturers in our sample and they belong also to the group with a low level of job satisfaction. This is not the only discrepancy we detected between both, leaders and lecturers. Leaders believe that the merger created the possibility to expand the equipment of the college, whereas lecturers are not really happy about the new didactic equipment and infra-structure. This could be an indicator that investments on college level not always respond to the expectations of the lecturers. Partially this hypothesis is confirmed when we see that lecturers believe that finance is more available on the college level. This is less so on the departmental level. In spite of the critique generated by the lecturers it is important to see that the merger contributed to some very important characteristics of the college: a clear, stable and multi-sectoral offer of courses, and a strong financial stability. Nonetheless, these aspects did not interest the lecturers.

College D offers a totally different picture. It is a very decentralized institute, where the financial and personnel management is still the responsibility of the departments. In other

words, finance and personnel are in a certain sense the responsibility of the old colleges (as they existed before the merger), moreover, the departments kept the same campus as before the merger and were composed of departments spread over several provinces. It could have been expected that lecturers would be more happy because the situation of the new college was very similar to the situation before the merger. Nevertheless, the lecturers were among the most unhappy about the merger and their work. This college has also low scores among the lecturers for participation in decision-making, communication with the chair of the department and identification with the college. Very interesting is also that a large part of the lecturers of this college belong to the group of lecturers that believe that the financial resources of their department and their college is low. This is a consequence of an extreme level of autonomy of the departments where most of the finance is distributed between the departments. After this operation almost nothing is left for initiatives on college level. Lecturers got the feeling the merger not only contributed to a loss of the department (the old college) but also for the new college. The college could maintain a very wide offer of courses, but could not find really a financial stability. The merger did not contribute to more happiness among the lecturers and more participation in decision-making by them.

4. Conclusion

This research teaches that it is very hard to make general statements about the conditions of a successful merger of colleges. Without any doubt centralized colleges with a very strong centralized decision-making power can concentrate their policy on the realization of results on the college level. A strong authority can take easily difficult decisions concerning the closure, the re-allocation or integration of courses. It is also capable to introduce an other distribution of the finance among the different departments, and between the departments and the central level. This may have positive consequences (e.g. offer of courses, stability) on condition that the total operation is well prepared and that the central resources are professionally managed. If not, it might come to a waste of resources. This was shown in the qualitative research.

Nonetheless, there are some risks in a very centralized college. It is maybe easier for a centralized college to pay less attention to the needs of the lecturers and it is also possible that some investments do not always contribute to teaching. Certainly it is very likely that the discrepancy between leaders and lecturers may grow, and this does not contribute to the well being of the lecturers.

In principle decentralized colleges are more capable to face these challenges. On the other hand, they are less prepared to take difficult decisions for the total college (for instance, how to rationalize the offer of courses), and they have less possibilities to invest on college level, because all money is needed on departmental level. This diminishes the risk of expensive overhead costs without added value. Decentralization, though, can take different forms. First, there is a difference between a moderate and a strong form of decentralization. In a moderate form of decentralization the departments play a determining role in the decision-making of the college, but a form of financial solidarity and collective investment is possible. In a strong decentralized institute departments have full financial autonomy, what means that the merger does not give any financial advantage for the college.

Decentralized colleges have not by definition a better form of deliberation in each department what might make the communication between lecturers and the chair of the department better. This research shows that some colleges are more successful than others. Without any doubt this is related to the local context of a department, its culture, the personal characteristics of the chair, etc.

References

- Fielden, J. (1991). Resource Implications of Mergers: Are There Any Economies? *Higher Education Quarterly*, 45 (2), 158-166.
- Goedegebuure, L. (1992) Mergers in Higher Education. A Comparative Analysis. Enschede: CHEPS.
- Goedegebuure, L. & Meek, L. (1991) Restructuring Higher Education. A Comparative Analysis between Australia and the Netherlands. *Comparative Education*, 27 (1), 7-2.
- Halter, A., & Gullerud, E. (1995). Academic mergers in social work programs autonomy or disharmony? *Journal of Social Work Education*, 31(2), 269-240.
- Martin, J., & Samels, J. (1994). *Merging Colleges For Mutual Growth: The Mutual Growth-Process - Myths and Realities*. London: The John Hopkins Press Ltd.
- McHugh, M., & Kyle, M. (1993). School Merger, a stressful challenge? *School Organisation*, 13(1), 11-26.

- Patterson, G. (2000). Findings on Economies of Scale in Higher Education: Implications for Strategies of Merger and Alliance. *EAIR Journal Tertiary Education and Management*, 6(4).
- Verhoeven, J.C., Devos, G., Smolders, C., Cools, W. & Velghe, J. (2002) *Hogescholen enkele jaren na de fusie*. Antwerpen/Apeldoorn: Garant.